

Steep decline in world fertility rates: Contraceptive use up sharply

The total number of contraceptive users has risen tenfold in the developing world in the past 25 years, to over 380 million users, often via new and safe technology, says the World Health Organization (WHO) in a new report.

These data are contained in WHO's "Reproductive Health, A Key to a Brighter Future" the most comprehensive report ever compiled on global reproductive health. The report was compiled to mark the 20th anniversary of the WHO Special Programme of Research, Development and Research Training in Human Reproduction established in 1972. The Programme, which is co-sponsored by the United Nations Development Programme, the United Nations Population Fund and the World Bank, has become the main institution for research on human reproduction within the United Nations system.

Contraceptives

"The most significant development in reproductive health over the past few decades has been the major expansion in the use of contraceptives, with major benefits to individuals, families, societies and the world at large", says Dr. Hiroshi Nakajima, Director-General of WHO.

The WHO report shows that the fertility rate – the average number of children per woman – in developing countries declined from 6.1 between 1965 and 1970 to 3.9 between 1985 and 1990.

This corresponds to a rise in the use of contraceptives in developing countries – defined as the percentage of married women of reproductive age (or their husbands) using any form of contraceptive – from 9% in 1965 to 1970 to 50% between 1985 and 1990.

The most commonly used method of contraception is female sterilization, followed by the intrauterine device, the pill, condoms and male sterilization.

The world's population would have increased by more than 400 million over the current level had the global campaign been delayed by only ten years. Projected to the year 2100, the additional increase would have amounted to 4.6 thousand million people.

To point out how rapidly some countries have changed, the report says that while the fertility rate in the United States of America took 58 years to drop from 6.5 to 3.5, the same drop took 27 years in Indonesia, 15 years in Colombia, eight years in Thailand, and only seven years in China.

The report reveals that declines in the fertility rate have been uneven in the developing world, with the steepest decline occurring in East Asia and the smallest in Africa.

This corresponds to the fact that the greatest rise in the use of contraceptives has been in East Asia, where currently some 70% of couples are using a method. This prevalence rate exceeds the average rate in developed countries, and represents an increase from 18 million users during the period 1965 to 1970 to 217 million between 1985 and 1990. In contrast, the use of contraceptives in Africa has increased only from 5% to 14%, from 2 million to 18 million users, in the same period.

But the report projects that the use of contraceptives in developing countries will increase to 59%, or 9% over current levels, by the year 2000. This should lead to a decline in the fertility rate to 3.3 children per women.

Access to family planning services varies widely between regions. Some 95% of people in East Asia have ready access to such services, but only 57% in South-east Asia and Latin America, and 54% in South Asia. The proportion falls off to 9% in sub-Saharan Africa.

WHO estimates that, overall, 60% of the people in developing countries have easy access to at least one modern method of contraception, meaning they can obtain supplies without spending more than two hours per month, or more than 1% of their wages. "In spite of these major advances, there is still a need to provide safe, effective and acceptable methods of family planning to the world's increasing population", says Dr. Mahmoud Fathalla, Director of the Special Programme of Research, Development and Research Training in Human Reproduction, and one of the authors of the report. "Even without any increase in contraceptive use beyond the current level, the number of contraceptive users can be expected to increase by about 108 million by the year 2000 because of a rise in the number of married women of reproductive age".

Abortion

The report estimates that 36 million to 53 million induced abortions are performed each year, an annual rate of 32–46 abortions per 1000 women of reproductive age.

Based on various estimates, 15 million are clandestine abortions, though the actual number may be as high as 22 million.

“These figures demonstrate the magnitude of unwanted pregnancies and the unmet need for family planning”, Dr. Fathalla says. “Unsafe abortion is one of the great neglected problems of health care in developing countries”.

The report describes a wide variety of laws on abortion among countries:

- 52 countries, with 25% of the world’s population, permit abortion only when a woman’s life is endangered;
- 42 countries, with 12% of the world’s population, have laws that permit abortion on broader medical grounds – to avert a threat to the woman’s general health and sometimes for genetic or judicial reasons, such as incest or rape;
- 13 countries, with 23% of the world’s population, allow abortion for social or sociomedical reasons;
- 25 countries, with 40% of the world’s population, permit abortion up to a certain point in gestation without requiring specific reasons.

The report also states that most women seeking abortion are married or living in stable unions and already have several children. However, in all parts of the world, a small but increasing proportion of abortion seekers are unmarried adolescents.

One surprising finding is that high abortion rates do not necessarily correlate with liberal abortion laws. For example, the Netherlands has one of the lowest abortion rates despite its liberal abortion law.

Infertility

WHO estimates that worldwide, more than sixty million couples are infertile.

The prevalence of infertility has been declining in recent years in several developing countries as a result of better preventive health care. Infertility trends in developed countries are difficult to estimate because of the high prevalence of voluntary infertility.

The most common and the most important cause of acquired infertility is pelvic infection resulting from sexually transmitted disease, an unsafe abortion or childbirth-related infection, all of which are preventable.

In a standardized clinical investigation of infertility involving more than 10 000 infertile couples in 25 countries, infections accounted for female infertility in 36% of the cases in developed countries, 85% in Africa, 39% in Asia, 44% in Latin America and 42% in the Eastern Mediterranean Region of WHO.

Sexually Transmitted Diseases

An estimated 250 million or more new cases of sexually transmitted infections – including syphilis, genital herpes, gonorrhoea, the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) and others – occur each year. The infections include: trichomoniasis – 120 million; chlamydia – 50 million; genital human papilloma virus – 30 million; gonorrhoea – 25 million; genital herpes – 20 million; syphilis – 3.5 million; chancroid – 2 million.

WHO estimates that, as at early 1992, some two million cases of Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome (AIDS) have occurred since the beginning of the pandemic, and at least 10–12 million HIV infections.

Although sexually transmitted infections have been increasing during the last 25 years, the advent and spread of HIV and AIDS has helped to increase the attention paid by governments, the health sector and the public to such diseases and infections, lending new impetus to efforts to prevent and control them. In addition, WHO says fear of AIDS has prompted changes in sexual behaviour leading, in some countries, to a stabilization or even a reduction in the level of some sexually transmitted infections.

Sexually transmitted infections threaten health in a variety of ways, particularly that of women. They can cause infertility, ectopic pregnancy and possibly even cancer. They threaten the newborn because they can be passed from infected mother to child. There is growing evidence that many sexually transmitted infections especially those that cause genital lesions or inflammations, can greatly increase the risk of sexual transmission of HIV.

According to Dr. Hiroshi Nakajima, “Sexually transmitted infections and diseases, including AIDS, have reached epidemic proportions globally, and if sexual behaviour is not modified and effective new prevention and control programmes are not implemented immediately, the resulting disease and mortality rates will be even more staggering”.

Of the 250 million sexually transmitted infections, the highest incidence occurs among young people aged 20–24 years, followed by persons aged 15–19 years and 25–29 years.

“Survey after survey demonstrates that women the world over are demanding safe, easy-to-use and medically proven family planning methods”, Dr. Nakajima says. “We have the technical knowledge to provide safe methods of contraception. However, political commitment and financial resources are sadly lacking”.